



PCs FOR 2006

A budget PC may not have the latest cutting-edge technology, but choose carefully and you can buy a futureproof system for just £650 inc VAT, as these nine impressive models prove

The very cheapest computers are often flawed, with outdated parts that make them candidates for replacement after only a year or so of use. Spend just a little more, though, and you can pick up a PC that is superb value, and will stand you in good stead for years to come.

This month we've tested nine powerful desktop computers that cost just £650 including VAT and delivery. Despite this low price, however, they're futureproof systems with none of the flaws associated with the cheapest computers. With a few carefully chosen upgrades, they could keep you computing for years to come.

Every model includes a stylish flat screen display, and two even include large 19" monitors. Several have powerful graphics cards, so you can play realistic 3D games. They all have at least 512MB of memory, so you won't have to worry

IN THIS REVIEW

Carrera Vision Plus CS-01
CCL Homestation FX-30
Evesham Axis 64 KD
Gateway 524GB
Gladiator Proteus Platinum
HP Compaq Presario SR1519UK
Mesh Matrix Vector X-Cite
PC Nextday Zoostorm 6-4401 Versatile PC
Watford Aries Performa 5565

about running demanding software – in fact, some have twice that amount.

Whatever you want to do with your PC, be it destroying zombies or preparing your tax return, we'll help you find a perfect PC at a petite price.



CHOOSING A... £650 PC

When you're buying a budget PC with one eye on the future, it's important that you consider each individual component carefully. This guide will help you pick the right parts for your needs

All the PCs in this month's Labs test are powerful computers ready to take on such everyday tasks as surfing the web and office work. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, though, so it's important to have a list of priorities in mind when choosing which to buy. Whatever you want to do with your PC, this guide will explain what to look for and what to avoid.

DUE PROCESS

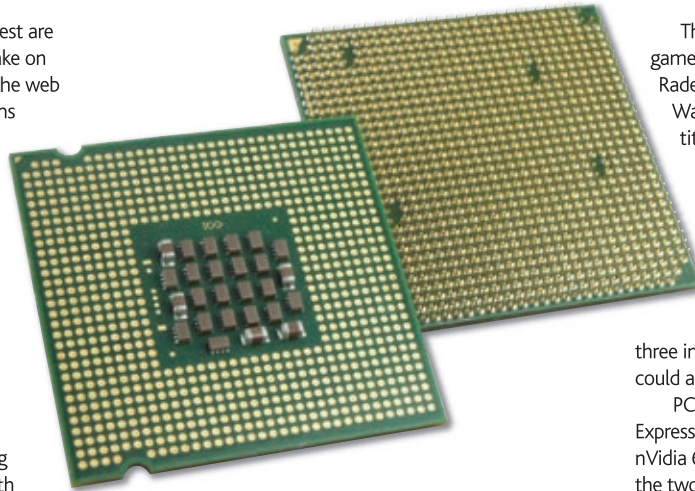
The heart of a PC is its processor. The computers in this group use one of three kinds of processor, and each has its own strengths and weaknesses.

If you want to use your PC for editing video files or large digital images, it's worth choosing one that uses an Intel Pentium 4 processor. These, as you can see from the benchmark results on page 170, tend to outperform the opposition when carrying out this kind of intensive task. Pentium 4 processors have traditionally been expensive compared to AMD's Athlon 64 processors, so sacrifices are sometimes needed elsewhere to include one. This isn't always the case, though: PC Nextday's Zoostorm uses a fast Pentium chip, but it is also the fastest computer at 3D tasks.

AMD's Athlon 64 processors are generally faster than Pentium 4 chips when playing 3D games. Today's Athlon 64s are also a good choice if you want to upgrade in the future, as you can easily swap them for a dual-core Athlon 64 X2 processor to add some extra speed.

The same cannot be said of AMD Sempron processors. These budget chips are cheap and relatively powerful, but they use an older processor socket. They run fast enough now, but in a year or two adding a faster model could be tricky.

For more information on processors, see our Labs test on page 208.



▲ Different processors have different strengths. Intel's Pentium 4 chips (left) are generally faster for such tasks as video encoding

DISPLAY DECISIONS

Not so long ago, PCs this affordable would have included bulky CRT displays. Thankfully, the price of flat-screen displays has now fallen significantly, and every computer in this group includes a smart LCD monitor. Amazingly, two even include 19" LCD screens. These run at the same resolution as a 17" screen, so you can't fit more work on screen at once, but the extra size is handy in almost every task.

Whatever size monitor you buy, it's important to consider its pixel response time. This indicates how quickly a pixel on the screen can change from black to white and back to black again. If you want to play 3D games or watch DVDs, look for a screen with a response time of 8ms or lower to ensure that fast-moving action won't end up looking blurry. If you want to use your PC for internet or office work, though, a response time of 16ms or above will be fine.

No figures or statistics can tell you the quality of a display, so check each review carefully. We'll explain which PCs will leave you wide-eyed in admiration and which will leave you cross-eyed, or just cross.

PICK A CARD

It's important to consider what kind of graphics card you want in your PC. If you would like to play the latest 3D games then it's important to get a card built around a powerful 3D processor. The nVidia GeForce 6600 cards used by Carrera, CCL and Mesh are reasonably powerful, and the 6800XT used in PC Nextday's system is superb.

These cards will suffice if you want to play games occasionally, but so will the cheaper ATI Radeon X550 cards used by Evesham and Watford. They will struggle with the latest titles, but you'll be able to play older games.

Three PCs in the group don't include a dedicated graphics card. The Gateway, HP and Gladiator PCs use a cheaper, integrated graphics chip. These are not suitable for running games, but are easily capable enough for other tasks such as office work or image editing. All three include a spare PCI Express x16 slot so you could add a graphics card in future.

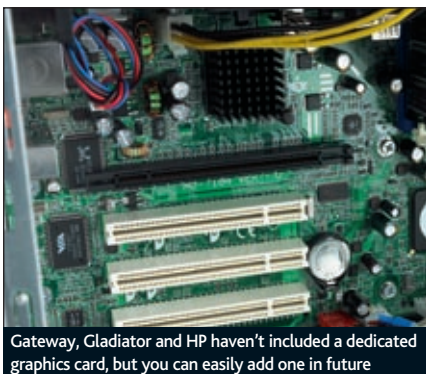
PC Nextday has also included an empty PCI Express x16 slot. This allows you to add a second nVidia 6800XT graphics card in future, and connect the two using a technology called SLI. This is great for games fans, as it is an easy way to double the 3D power available in a year or two.

WARRANTY WARNING

Finally, it's extremely important to make sure that you know what kind of warranty is included when you buy a PC system. All the PCs in this group include at least one year of return-to-base (RTB) support should your PC break down. Onsite warranties, where the vendor will fix the PC at your home, are included with many. The table on page 172 shows what kind of warranty is included with each PC, alongside details on when you can receive technical support via telephone.



▲ A 19" LCD is a luxury at this price. The extra size is useful in almost all applications



Gateway, Gladiator and HP haven't included a dedicated graphics card, but you can easily add one in future



CARRERA Vision Plus CS-01

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £650 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Watford 08716 661616

DETAILS www.savastore.com

The Vision Plus CS-01 has a good graphics card and is reasonably fast. It's not particularly well equipped, but it comes with a decent warranty.

FEATURES

The Vision Plus CS-01 is housed in a sturdy and attractive Cooler Master case. This has plenty of empty drive bays for future upgrades but it's a bit cramped around the PCI slots. When the PC is turned on, the front of the case glows blue.

Carrera's warranty, which includes a year of onsite cover, is one of the best available here. The Vision Plus CS-01 is also the only PC in this group to include a set of 5.1 surround-sound speakers. The 17" LG display produces a crisp and clear picture, although its response time is a little slow for gaming. Only one optical drive is included, and we were disappointed to see that the system lacks basic features, such as a floppy drive, FireWire port and memory card reader.

PERFORMANCE

The AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor used by Carrera is a reasonable choice at this price, and as it uses the newer Socket 939 processor slot it will be easy to upgrade in future should you need more speed. As it is, the Vision Plus scored an average 99 overall in our *Shopper* application benchmarks. It's fast enough for most uses but a little slow in demanding tasks such as video editing.

Carrera deserves credit for including a 128MB GeForce 6600 graphics card at this price. The Vision Plus ran our Doom 3 test at 24.5fps, and can produce better frame rates if the detail settings are reduced. It's a reasonably good gaming PC.

VERDICT

Carrera's Vision Plus CS-01 is reasonably powerful in Windows and has a good graphics card. It's missing a memory card reader and floppy disk drive, but it's still a good buy.



Good 3D performance; onsite warranty



Only averagely powerful in Windows

SPECIFICATIONS AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor, 512MB RAM, 200GB hard disk, 128MB nVidia GeForce 6600 graphics, DVD +/-RW +DL, 17" LCD



CCL Homestation FX-30

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £650 inc VAT

SUPPLIER CCL Computers 01274 471201

DETAILS www.cclonline.com

The Homestation isn't very powerful, but its peripherals are particularly well chosen and it has a decent onsite warranty.

FEATURES

The Homestation comes in a big, ugly case. Large cases usually indicate that a PC will be easy to expand in future, but unfortunately that is not true of the Homestation. Both PCI slots are already full, so adding a TV tuner would be tricky, and with no FireWire ports you'd have difficulty connecting a digital video camera. The sole benefit of the Homestation's monolithic case is its lockable door. This protects the floppy drive, memory card slots and two-layer DVD writer from prying children and pets.

A pair of punchy Logitech X-230 2.1 speakers is included, as are a Logitech wireless keyboard and optical mouse. The warranty includes a year of onsite service. The 17" Acer display has a fast refresh rate, so games and DVDs don't blur, and produces a reasonably bright and crisp image. Only one optical drive is included, but it's a capable model that can write to both types of two-layer disc.

PERFORMANCE

Like the similarly specified Carrera Vision Plus CS-01, the Homestation uses an AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor with 512MB of RAM and an nVidia GeForce 6600 graphics card. In our tests, however, it was slightly slower than Carrera's. It scored a sluggish 90 overall in our *Shopper* benchmarks.

It ran our Doom 3 test at a decent 23.1fps. By turning down the detail settings, you'll be able to run recent games at a playable speed.

VERDICT

CCL's Homestation isn't very fast in Windows, but it's a decent way to play 3D games without spending a fortune. Its speakers are good, but we'd recommend the similar Carrera PC instead.



Onsite warranty; good graphics card



No FireWire ports or free PCI slots; poor Windows performance

SPECIFICATIONS AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor, 512MB RAM, 200GB hard disk, 256MB nVidia GeForce 6600 graphics, DVD +/-RW +/-DL, 17" LCD



EVESHAM Axis 64 KD

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £650 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Evesham 08701 609500

DETAILS www.evesham.com

The Axis 64 KD isn't particularly fast, and it lacks a few parts that we expect at this price. It has a good monitor, though, and a decent warranty.

FEATURES

Evesham's Axis 64 KD comes built into a rather plain black and silver case. It might look average, but it is easy to take apart should you want to add a PCI card or an extra hard disk. This is a task you could find yourself undertaking sooner rather than later, as only a 160GB hard disk is included as standard. It has no floppy disk drive, no memory card reader and no FireWire ports.

These sacrifices are annoying, but Evesham has made a wiser choice by including a ViewSonic VE710B display. This is one of the best 17" LCDs in the group, and has a fast 8ms refresh rate that's ideal for entertainment use. You also get a good warranty, with one year of onsite cover and two further years of return-to-base service.

PERFORMANCE

Like the PCs made by Carrera and CCL, the Axis 64 KD is equipped with an AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor and 512MB of RAM. It scored 93 in our application benchmarks, which is one of the poorer scores in the group, but it's still powerful enough to take on most computing tasks.

Sadly, Evesham's choice of graphics card is less powerful. The Radeon X550 isn't a particularly fast 3D processor, and the X550 used here runs slower than most. It ran our Doom 3 test at just 7.8fps, and you'll struggle to play the latest games even at reduced detail settings. Still, as it has no fans this graphics card makes the Evesham system a quieter PC than most.

VERDICT

The Axis 64 KD is well built, but it's a little underpowered in Windows and lacks the power to play recent 3D games. You can buy better.



Decent display; onsite warranty



Slow in Windows and 3D games; small hard disk

SPECIFICATIONS AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor, 512MB RAM, 160GB hard disk, 256MB ATI Radeon X550 graphics, DVD +/-RW +/-DL, 17" LCD





GATEWAY 524GB

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £650 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.comet.co.uk

DETAILS <http://uk.gateway.com>

After a long absence from the UK, Gateway has returned with a PC that's impressive, although rather unbalanced.

FEATURES

The 524GB comes in an attractive if plasticky silver case. It's alarmingly loud when starting up, but quiets down once Windows has loaded.

The system has a roomy 250GB hard disk but its DVD writer is rather slow when writing DVD+R DL discs. A memory card reader is included, but a floppy drive is not. We were impressed to see that Gateway had included a 19" LCD monitor, but it's not ideal for image editing. We noticed some banding in our greyscale transition test, and solid blocks of colour were a little uneven.

The keyboard is serviceable but its spongy keys aren't comfortable to type on for long periods. The old-fashioned ball mouse is below standard, and there's no onsite warranty.

PERFORMANCE

The Gateway's 3.2GHz Intel Pentium 4 640 processor is the most powerful in this group. It tore through the video-encoding and image-editing sections of our benchmark, and scored 117 overall. If you want to use demanding applications such as video-editing software, this is without a doubt the best PC to buy.

This power comes at the expense of 3D performance, however. Gateway hasn't included a dedicated 3D graphics card, instead choosing to rely on an Intel chip on the motherboard. This PC is incapable of playing recent 3D games.

VERDICT

The 524GB will appeal to some users, but it's not suitable for everyone. If you want to play games, you should look elsewhere and choose a PC with a powerful 3D graphics card. If, on the other hand, you want a PC only for office work or working with video files, this is a fine choice.

✓ Powerful processor; 19" monitor

✗ Useless for gaming; no onsite warranty

SPECIFICATIONS Intel Pentium 4 640 3.2GHz, 512MB RAM, 250GB hard disk, Intel GMA900 integrated graphics, DVD +/-RW +DL, 19" LCD



GLADIATOR Proteus Platinum

RATING ★★

PRICE £649 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Gladiator 08456 444666

DETAILS www.gladiatorcomputers.com

The Proteus has a 19" screen and is reasonably powerful in Windows, but too much has been sacrificed for its classy peripherals.

FEATURES

Gladiator has fitted the Proteus with 1GB of RAM, a spacious 250GB hard disk and two optical drives. The Logitech UltraX keyboard and MX310 optical mouse are the best in this group, and the 19" LG monitor is excellent. Unfortunately, these parts come at the expense of future upgradability. The Proteus uses the older Socket 754 processor slot, so adding a faster processor in a year or two could be tricky. Inside, there are no free PCI slots or drive bays. The motherboard looks rather cramped and untidy inside the case.

PERFORMANCE

The Proteus is built around a processor from AMD's budget Sempron range but it's still fairly powerful. With a score of 100 overall in our *Shopper* application benchmarks, it is just above average in our performance table.

Unfortunately, none of the money saved by using a cheaper processor was spent on a powerful 3D graphics card. Like Gateway's PC, the Proteus uses a graphics chip integrated on the motherboard. It ran our Doom 3 test at just 2.2fps, and is unsuitable for playing 3D games. The Proteus does have a free PCI Express x16 slot, though, so you could add a graphics card in future.

VERDICT

Gladiator has attempted to trade off future upgradability and raw power in favour of a good selection of peripherals. Unfortunately, the result is poor value. The good keyboard, mouse and screen compensate for the limited upgrade potential, but not for the cheap 3D processor. If you're prepared to sacrifice 3D gaming for a large screen, pick the Gateway 524GB.

✓ 19" monitor; twin optical drives; large hard disk

✗ No room for expansion; unsuitable for gaming

SPECIFICATIONS AMD Sempron 3400 processor, 1GB RAM, 250GB hard disk, ATI Xpress 200G integrated graphics, DVD +/-RW +/-DL, DVD-ROM, 19" LCD



HP Compaq Presario SR1519UK

RATING ★★

PRICE £569 inc VAT

SUPPLIER HP 08700 104320

DETAILS www.hp.com/uk

HP's Presario has one clear advantage over the competition this month: it's around £80 cheaper. Unfortunately, it's slow and has a small hard disk.

FEATURES

HP sells the Presario SR1519UK with its own HP vs17 17" monitor. This produces a crisp and clear picture, but its controls are fiddly and located awkwardly on the side of the screen. No external speakers are included, and the monitor's speakers aren't up to much. The DVD drive can currently only write to DVD-R discs at 8X, although its manufacturer promises that a firmware upgrade will speed this up in future.

The 160GB hard disk is annoyingly small, and there's a memory card reader but no floppy drive. The keyboard and mouse are particularly poor. The keyboard is spongy, and the mouse is an old-fashioned ball model that will need replacing. No onsite warranty is included.

PERFORMANCE

The Athlon 64 3200+ processor used in the Presario is the most powerful AMD chip in the group. Unfortunately, its performance is sapped by the ATI integrated graphics chip, which eats up a massive chunk of the 512MB system memory and limits performance in our image-manipulation test. The system initially scored just 68 overall in our *Shopper* benchmarks, but by reducing the amount of memory allocated to the graphics chip we increased this to 79.

The Xpress 200 graphics chip cannot compete with the dedicated graphics cards used in six of the other PCs. It ran our Doom 3 test at just 2.2 frames per second, and is unsuitable for playing recent 3D games.

VERDICT

The Presario is cheaper than the other computers in this group, but even at this low price it is hard to recommend. It's only suitable for those who want a PC for office tasks, but they should buy the far superior Gateway system.

✓ Decent 17" monitor

✗ Slow; small hard disk; no onsite warranty

SPECIFICATIONS Athlon 64 3200+ processor, 512MB RAM, 160GB hard disk, ATI Xpress 200 integrated graphics, DVD +/-RW DL, 17" LCD



MESH Matrix Vector X-Cite

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £649 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Mesh Computers 08700 464747

DETAILS www.meshcomputers.com

Mesh's Matrix Vector X-Cite has a decent graphics card and can play recent 3D games. Unfortunately its monitor is poor, its hard disk is small and it has no FireWire port.

FEATURES

Like the Carrera, CCL and Evesham PCs, the Matrix Vector X-Cite uses an AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor. It has no memory card reader, but it comes with two optical drives and a warranty that includes one year of onsite cover.

Although the Vector is bundled with CyberLink's PowerDirector 3 video-editing software, it has no FireWire port for connecting a digital camcorder. Its 160GB hard disk is smaller than we would expect at this price.

The Mesh scored 100 in our image-manipulation test, but its Sharp 17" LCD monitor is not suitable for any serious image editing. It produces a bright image, but its colour reproduction was a little irregular, with some uneven patches in our solid colour tests. It also had difficulty producing a smooth greyscale from black to white.

PERFORMANCE

With an AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor and a generous 1GB of RAM, the Vector scored 93 in our *Shopper* application benchmarks. It's a little slower than average in this group.

Its performance in our 3D test was much better. It is one of three PCs in the group with an nVidia GeForce 6600 graphics card, and it ran our Doom 3 test at a playable 24.4fps. The Vector is capable of playing recent games, although you may have to sacrifice some visual detail to get the best results.

VERDICT

The Matrix Vector X-Cite looks poor compared to the similar Carrera Vision Plus. It's reasonably fast in 3D games, but not outstandingly so, and its monitor is particularly poor.

✓ Good graphics card, 1GB of RAM and a decent warranty

✗ Average Windows performance; poor monitor

SPECIFICATIONS AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor, 1GB RAM, 160GB hard disk, DVD+/-RW DL, 128MB nVidia GeForce 6600 graphics, 17" LCD



PC NEXTDAY Zoostorm 6-4401 Versatile PC

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £650 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.pcnextday.co.uk

DETAILS www.pcnextday.co.uk



PC Nextday's Zoostorm is powerful in Windows and astonishingly quick in 3D applications. Apart from its limited warranty, the only downsides are its cheap mouse and keyboard.

FEATURES

The Zoostorm's case is tricky to open, but it has greater potential for future expansion than every other PC in the group. Its motherboard has two PCI Express x16 slots, so you can double its 3D power in future by adding a second nVidia graphics card and using the two in SLI mode.

This makes it possible to forgive PC Nextday for the terrible mouse and keyboard. You'll need to buy a new set. We would also have preferred a larger hard disk than the 160GB one used here, and no onsite warranty is included.

PC Nextday has included an AOC LM728 17" display with the PC. It has a quick response time ideal for gaming and produces a sharp picture, but it creates a slightly dingy white.

PERFORMANCE

Like Gateway, PC Nextday has chosen to use an Intel Pentium 4 processor. The model that is used here is slightly slower, but it still managed to produce a superb 110 overall in our *Shopper* application benchmarks.

This excellent processor is accompanied by the best graphics card in the group. The nVidia GeForce 6800XT card ran our Doom 3 test almost twice as fast as its nearest rival, producing 45.1fps. This is a great system for game fans on a tight budget.

VERDICT

The Zoostorm is the second-fastest PC here in Windows and easily the best in 3D games. Its warranty isn't great and the keyboard and mouse are nasty, but it's still the best PC here by some margin.

✓ Great in Windows and games; upgradable to SLI

✗ No onsite warranty; cheap keyboard and mouse

SPECIFICATIONS Intel Pentium 4 630 processor, 512MB RAM, 160GB hard disk, 128MB nVidia GeForce 6800XT graphics card, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, 17" LCD



WATFORD Aries Performa 5565

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £650 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Watford 08716 661616

DETAILS www.savastore.com

Watford's Aries Performa 5565 is reasonably fast and, apart from some cheap speakers, its peripherals are well chosen. In this group, though, it looks decidedly average.

FEATURES

The Performa 5565 is built around a sturdy and attractive Cooler Master case and has two DVD drives. Like the Gladiator Proteus, though, it uses the older Socket 754 processor slot so it might be tricky to upgrade in future.

The 17" Sony LCD can be easily adjusted to a comfortable viewing height. Its backlighting is slightly uneven, so white areas aren't uniform, but otherwise its picture quality is acceptable. The Labtec Spin 75 speakers are poor, but the Microsoft keyboard and mouse are comfortable to use. The warranty includes one year of convenient onsite service.

PERFORMANCE

Like Gladiator Computers, Watford has chosen to use a cheap but powerful AMD Sempron processor. Together with 512MB of RAM, it produced a score of 104 overall in our *Shopper* application benchmarks. This is a powerful computer, but it can't keep up with the Pentium-based systems.

The graphics card used by Watford is based on the same ATI Radeon X550 chip as Evesham's system. This one runs at a higher clock speed, but it still only produced 14.4fps in our Doom 3 test. It's good enough for occasional game playing, but if you want to play games regularly you should buy a computer with more 3D power.

VERDICT

Watford's Aries Performa 5565 is a decent PC, but it's outclassed by other systems in the group. It's fairly fast in Windows, but the Pentium-based systems are faster. Similarly, it performs acceptably in 3D, but four other computers here are far quicker. It's a good buy, but not the best.

✓ Two optical drives; easily adjustable monitor; lengthy warranty

✗ Average 3D performance; cheap speakers

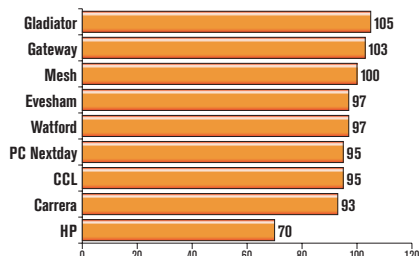
SPECIFICATIONS AMD Sempron 3400+ processor, 512MB RAM, 200GB hard disk, 256MB ATI Radeon X550 graphics, DVD+/-R DL, 17" LCD



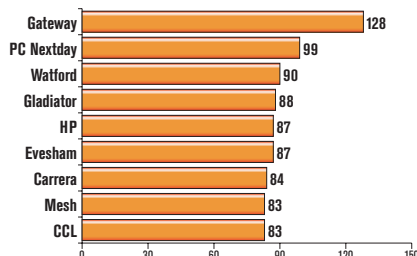
BENCHMARKS

2D Performance **Shopper application tests**

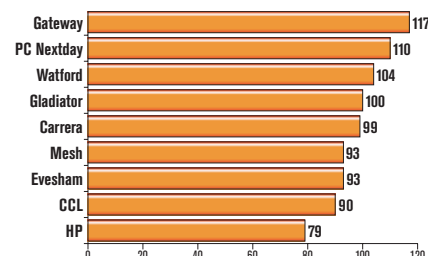
Image-Editing Test



Video-Encoding Test



Overall



SETTINGS We run our application tests at 1,024x768 resolution and in 32-bit colour
WEB www.computershopper.co.uk

Computer Shopper's 2D benchmarks are designed to show how PCs stand up to the toughest tasks Windows can throw at them. Today's PCs have no problem running office applications such as Word and Excel, so we chose to focus our tests on areas where you could experience difficulties.

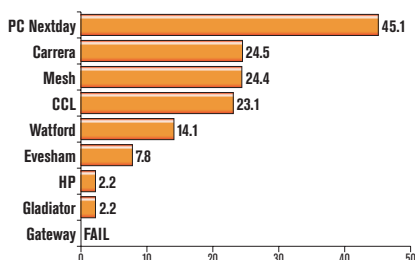
In version 1.0 there are three scripts. Our image-editing test simulates a session of photo enhancement using Paint Shop Pro, culminating with the memory-intensive composition of a

panorama from a set of digital snaps. Encoding a short video to MPEG-2 format is an extremely processor-intensive task, and one that anyone interested in transferring home videos to DVD will have to tackle. Finally, a set of MP3s is generated by ripping an audio CD.

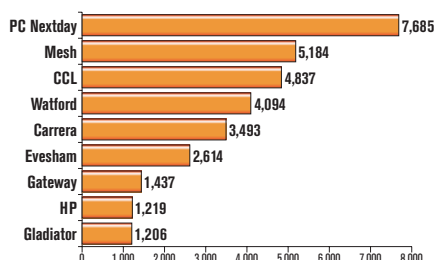
We compiled the tests with the help of our sister magazine for performance computing, *Custom PC*. Figures are relative to a reference Evesham Athlon 64 3500+ system, which scores 100 in all tests.

3D Performance **Doom 3/3DMark03**

Doom 3 (fps)



3DMark03



SETTINGS 1,024x768 resolution, high quality, 4x AA
WEB www.doom3.com

We run a timed demo in Doom 3 to test whether a PC has the power needed to play cutting-edge 3D games with ease. A good score here means that it should cope with any graphically intense 3D game.

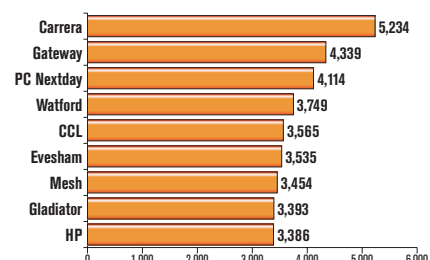


SETTINGS 1,024x768 resolution, 32-bit colour, default settings
WEB www.futuremark.com

3DMark03 is Futuremark's 3D benchmark. It comprises four game tests from four different genres. The workload is representative of games coming on to the market now.

PCMark04

PCMark04



SETTINGS 1,024x768 resolution, 32-bit colour, default settings
WEB www.futuremark.com

As well as our own benchmarks, we test all desktop and notebook PCs using Futuremark's PCMark04. You can download a free version of this benchmark from www.futuremark.com/download.

LABS VERDICT **£650 PCs**

Creating a great PC for a low price is a delicate balancing act. Using one top-of-the-range part requires a cheaper one elsewhere, and it's all too easy to create a computer that excels in one area but appals in another. Fortunately, most of the PCs here offer a balance of abilities ideal for any home.

Several PCs include an Athlon 64 3000+ processor and an nVidia GeForce 6600 graphics card. This is a good combination, and the best of these systems is Carrera's Vision Plus CS-01. It's reasonably powerful and has a good warranty.

Gateway's 524GB is absolutely useless for gaming, but with a powerful Pentium 4 processor and a 19" LCD it's great if you want a PC for video editing or home office work.

The clear winner, however, is PC Nextday's Zoostorm 6-4401 Versatile PC. Its mouse and keyboard are cheap and it has no onsite warranty, but its performance in both Windows applications and 3D games is superb. It's the best choice for gaming, a very good choice for video editing, and a stupendous computer at this price. It wins our Best Buy award. **CS**

PC NEXTDAY
Zoostorm 6-4401
Versatile PC





MANUFACTURER	CARRERA	CCL	EVESHAM	GATEWAY
Model	Vision Plus CS-01	Homestation FX-30	Axis 64 KD	524GB
Rating	★★★★	★★★	★★	★★★★
Processor	AMD Athlon 64 3000+	AMD Athlon 64 3000+	AMD Athlon 64 3000+	Intel Pentium 4 640
Processor speed	1.8GHz	1.8GHz	1.8GHz	3.2GHz
Processor socket	Socket 939	Socket 939	Socket 939	Socket 775
Level I cache	128KB	128KB	128KB	28KB
Level II cache	512KB	512KB	512KB	2MB
Memory installed	512MB	512MB	512MB	512MB
Memory type	PC3200	PC3200	PC3200	PC3200
Maximum memory	2GB	2GB	4GB	4GB
Motherboard	Foxconn WinFast CK804M01-6KS	Foxconn WinFast CK804M01-6KS	MSI nForce 4 Standard	Intel 915G/AugsburgG
Motherboard chipset	nVidia nForce 4	nVidia nForce 4	MSI MS-7125	Intel 915G/AugsburgG
BIOS type	Phoenix	Phoenix	Phoenix	AMI
PORTS				
USB2 ports (front/rear)	2/4	2/4	2/4	2/4
FireWire ports (front/rear)	0/0	0/0	0/0	2/1
Networking	10/100/1,000	10/100/1,000	10/100/1,000	10/100
Legacy ports	Parallel, 2x PS/2, Serial	Parallel, 2x PS/2, Serial	Parallel, 2x PS/2, Serial	Parallel, 2x PS/2, Serial
INTERNAL EXPANSION				
Case	Mini tower	Midi tower	Midi tower	Mini tower
Case size HxWxD	495x235x460mm	460x180x440mm	435x222x495mm	362x184x406mm
PCI (free)	2 (1)	2 (0)	4 (3)	2 (1)
PCI-E x1 (free)	1 (1)	1 (1)	1 (1)	1 (0)
PCI-E x16 (free)	1 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0)	1 (1)
AGP (free)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Serial ATA (free)	4 (3)	4 (3)	4 (3)	4 (3)
Memory (free)	2 (0)	2 (1)	4 (2)	4 (2)
Drive bays 3½" (free)	5 (4)	3 (1)	5 (4)	3 (2)
Drive bays 5¼" (free)	5 (4)	3 (2)	4 (3)	2 (1)
HARD DISK				
Model	Maxtor DiamondMax 10 6B200M0	Maxtor DiamondMax Plus 10 6L200M0	Western Digital Caviar SE WD1600JD	Western Digital Caviar WD3200JD
Interface	SATA 150	SATA 150	SATA 150	SATA 150
Capacity	200GB	200GB	160GB	250GB
Spin speed	7,200rpm	7,200rpm	7,200rpm	7,200rpm
GRAPHICS				
Technology	PCI Express	PCI Express	PCI Express	Integrated graphics
Graphics card	Gigabyte GeForce 6600	Sparkle GeForce 6600	GeCube Radeon X550	Integrated
Graphics chipset	nVidia GeForce 6600	nVidia GeForce 6600	ATI Radeon X550	Intel 915G
Graphics memory	128MB	256MB	256MB	Up to 224MB shared
Graphics/video ports	DVI, D-sub, S-video out	DVI, D-sub, S-video out	DVI, D-sub, composite out, S-video out	D-sub
SOUND				
Sound card	nVidia nForce audio	nVidia nForce audio	Realtek ALC850	Realtek ALC860
Sound card outputs	5.1 line out	5.1 line out	5.1 line out, coaxial S/PDIF out, optical S/PDIF out	5.1 line out
Speakers	Creative P5800 5.1	Logitech X-230 2.1	Altec Lansing 121 2.1	Gateway G-MAX 2000/Diamond Audio Technology Edison 2.0
REMOVABLE DRIVES				
Floppy drive 3½"	No	Yes	No	No
Memory card reader	No	CompactFlash, Secure Digital, MultiMedia Card, Memory Stick, Smart Media, MicroDrive	No	CompactFlash, Secure Digital, MultiMedia Card, Memory Stick, Smart Media, MicroDrive
Optical drive	LG GSA 4163B (16X DVD+R, 16X DVD-R, 8X DVD+RW, 6X DVD-RW, 4X DVD+R DL, 5X DVD-RAM, 40X CD-R, 24X CD-RW, 16X DVD-ROM, 40X CD-ROM)	NEC ND4550 (16X DVD+R, 16X DVD-R, 8X DVD+RW, 6X DVD-RW, 8X DVD+R DL, 6X DVD-R DL, 48X CD-R, 32X CD-RW, 16X DVD-ROM, 48X CD-ROM)	Sony DW-Q28A (16X DVD+R, 16X DVD-R, 8X DVD+RW, 6X DVD-RW, 4X DVD+R DL, 4X DVD-R DL, 48X CD-R, 24X CD-RW, 16X DVD-ROM, 48X CD-ROM)	Samsung TS-H552B (16X DVD+R, 12X DVD-R, 4X DVD+RW, 4X DVD-RW, 2.4X DVD+R DL, 40X CD-R, 32X CD-RW, 16X DVD-ROM, 48X CD-ROM)
DISPLAY				
Size and technology	17" LCD	17" LCD	17" LCD	19" LCD
Model	LG 1715S	Acer AL1714sm	ViewSonic VE710b	Gateway FPD1960
Response time	16ms	8ms	8ms	16ms
Inputs	D-sub	D-sub	D-sub	D-sub, DVI
OTHER HARDWARE				
Modem	No	Yes	No	Yes
Keyboard	Microsoft Basic Keyboard 1.0A	Logitech Internet Cordless Keyboard	Microsoft Basic Keyboard 1.0A	Gateway Premium Multimedia Keyboard
Mouse	Microsoft Basic Optical Mouse 1.0A	Logitech Internet Cordless Mouse	Microsoft Basic Optical Mouse 1.0A	Gateway Two Button Wheel Ball Mouse
Keyboard/mouse rating	3	3	3	2
Extras	None	None	None	None
SOFTWARE				
Software included	Microsoft Works 8, CyberLink PowerDVD 5, Panda Antivirus Titanium 2004, Roxio Easy Media Creator 7	Microsoft Works 7, CyberLink Power DVD 6, Bullguard Antivirus	Microsoft Works 8, Bullguard Firewall and Antivirus suite, Roxio Easy Media Creator 7	Microsoft Works 8, Microsoft Money 2005, CyberLink PowerDVD 6.0, Nero 6
Operating system	Windows XP Home	Windows XP Home	Windows XP Home	Windows XP Home
Operating system restore option	Windows CD, restore CD	Windows CD	Restore CD	Restore partition
BUYING INFORMATION				
Parts warranty	One year onsite	One year onsite, two years RTB	One year onsite, two years RTB	One year collect and return
Labour warranty	One year onsite, five years RTB	One year onsite, two years RTB	One year onsite, two years RTB	One year collect and return
Tech support times	9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat	9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat	9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat	9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat, 10am-6pm Sun
Company founded	1972	1995	1983	1985
Tech support staff	20	10	83	N/A
Employees	130	100	419	N/A
Price including delivery (inc VAT)	£650	£650	£650	£650
Price including delivery (ex VAT)	£553	£553	£553	£553
Contact	Watford Electronics	CCL	Evesham	Comet
Phone	08716 661616	01274 471201	08701 609500	08705 425 425
Web	www.savastore.com	www.cclonline.com	www.evesham.com	www.comet.co.uk



GLADIATOR	HP	MESH	PCNEXTDAY	WATFORD
Proteus Platinum	Compaq Presario SR1519UK	Matrix Vector X-Cite	Zoostorm 6-4401 Versatile PC	Aries Performa 5565
★★	★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★
AMD Sempron 3400	AMD Athlon 64 3200+	AMD Athlon 64 3000+	Intel Pentium 4 630	AMD Sempron 3400
2.0GHz	2.2GHz	1.8GHz	3GHz	2GHz
Socket 754	Socket 939	Socket 939	Socket 775	Socket 754
128KB	128KB	128KB	16KB	128KB
256KB	512KB	512KB	2MB	256KB
1GB	512MB	1GB	512MB	512MB
PC3200	PC3200	PC3200	PC3200	PC3200
2GB	2GB	4GB	2GB	2GB
EQS M62KB-MLF	MSI MS-7184	Asus A8N-E	ECS 915PL-A2	EQS M62KB-MLF
ATI RS480	ATI RS482	nVidia nForce4 Ultra	Intel 915PL	ATI RS480
Phoenix	Phoenix	Phoenix	AMI	Phoenix
2/4	3/4	2/6	2/4	2/4
0/1	1/1	0/0	0/0	1/1
10/100	10/100	10/100/1,000	10/100	10/100
Parallel, 2x PS/2	Parallel, 2x PS/2	Parallel, 2x PS/2, Serial	Parallel, 2x PS/2, Serial	Parallel, 2x PS/2, Serial
Mini tower	Mini tower	Midi tower	Midi tower	Midi tower
375x180x390mm	390x182x420mm	478x207x458mm	420x210x445mm	435x202x480mm
2 (0)	3 (2)	3 (1)	3 (3)	2 (2)
1 (1)	0 (0)	2 (2)	1 (0)	1 (0)
1 (1)	1 (1)	1 (0)	2 (1)	1 (0)
0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
4 (3)	2 (2)	4 (3)	4 (3)	4 (3)
2 (0)	4 (3)	4 (2)	2 (0)	2 (1)
3 (0)	4 (2)	4 (2)	3 (1)	5 (4)
2 (0)	2 (1)	3 (2)	3 (2)	5 (3)
Hitachi 7K250	Samsung SP1604N	Maxtor DiamondMax 6L160M0	Western Digital Caviar SE WD1600JS	Maxtor 6L200M0
SATA 150	IDE	SATA 150	SATA 150	SATA 150
250GB	160GB	160GB	160GB	200GB
7,200rpm	7,200rpm	7,200rpm	7,200rpm	7,200rpm
Integrated graphics	Integrated graphics	PCI Express	PCI Express	PCI Express
Integrated	Integrated	nVidia GeForce 6600	Inno3D GeForce 6800XT	Radeon X550
ATI Radeon Xpress 200G	ATI Radeon Xpress 200	nVidia GeForce 6600	nVidia GeForce 6800XT	ATI Radeon X550
Up to 256MB shared	Up to 128MB shared	128MB	128MB	256MB
D-sub, composite out, S-video out	D-sub	DVI, D-sub, composite out, S-video out	DVI, D-sub, S-video out	DVI, D-sub, composite in/out, S-video in/out
Realtek ALC655	Realtek ALC658	nVidia MCP04	Realtek ALC850	Realtek ALC 655
5.1 line out, coaxial S/PDIF out	5.1 line out, coaxial S/PDIF out	5.1 line out, coaxial S/PDIF out	5.1 line out	5.1 line out, coaxial S/PDIF out
Creative Inspire T3000 2.1	Integrated into monitor	Creative SBS260 2.1	Zoostorm S2176 2.1	Labtec Spin 75 2.0
Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
CompactFlash, Secure Digital, MultiMedia Card, Memory Stick, Smart Media, MicroDrive	CompactFlash, Secure Digital, MultiMedia Card, Memory Stick, Smart Media, MicroDrive, xD	No	CompactFlash, Secure Digital, MultiMedia Card, Memory Stick, Smart Media, MicroDrive, xD	CompactFlash, Secure Digital, MultiMedia Card, Memory Stick, Smart Media, MicroDrive
NEC ND4550 (16X DVD+R, 16X DVD-R, 8X DVD+RW, 6X DVD-RW, 8X DVD+R DL, 6X DVD-R DL, 5X DVD-RAM, 48X CD-R, 32X CD-RW, 16X DVD-ROM, 48X CD-ROM), Sony DDU 1613 (16X DVD-ROM, 40X CD-ROM)	LG GWA 4161B (16X DVD+R, 8X DVD-R, 4X DVD+RW, 4X DVD-RW, 2.4X DVD+R DL, 40X CD-R, 24X CD-RW, 16X DVD-ROM, 40X CD-ROM)	Sony DW-Q28A (16X DVD+R, 16X DVD-R, 8X DVD+RW, 6X DVD-RW, 4X DVD+R DL, 4X DVD-R DL, 48X CD-R, 24X CD-RW, 16X DVD-ROM, 48X CD-ROM), Sony DDU 1613 (16X DVD-ROM, 40X CD-ROM)	Philips PBDV1628B (16X DVD+R, 16X DVD-R, 8X DVD+RW, 6X DVD-RW, 8X DVD+R DL, 4X DVD-R DL, 48X CD-R, 32X CD-RW, 16X DVD-ROM, 48X CD-ROM)	LG CSA 4163B (16X DVD+R, 16X DVD-R, 8X DVD+RW, 6X DVD-RW, 4X DVD+R DL, 5x DVD-RAM, 40X CD-R, 24X CD-RW, 16X DVD-ROM, 40X CD-ROM), Sony DDU 1615 (16X DVD-ROM, 48X CD-ROM)
19" LCD	17" LCD	17" LCD	17" LCD	17" LCD
LG L1915S	HP vs17	Sharp LL-173C-b	AOC LM728	Sony SDM-S74E
12ms	16ms	12ms	8ms	16ms
D-sub	D-sub	D-sub	D-sub, DVI	D-sub, DVI
No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Logitech UltraX keyboard	Compaq Wired Keyboard	Logitech Internet Cordless Keyboard	A4Tech Wireless Desktop Keyboard	Microsoft Basic Keyboard 1.0A
Logitech MX310 optical mouse	Compaq Wired Scrolling Ball Mouse	Logitech Internet Cordless Mouse	A4Tech Wireless Ball Mouse	Microsoft Basic Optical Mouse 1.0A
4	1	3	2	3
None	None	None	None	None
Microsoft Works 8, Nero Suite 6, CyberLink PowerDVD 5	Microsoft Works 8, Sonic DigitalMedia Plus 7.0, InterVideo WinDVD 5.0	Microsoft Works 8, CyberLink PowerDVD 6, CyberLink Power2Go 4, CyberLink PowerProducer 3, CyberLinkPowerDirector 3, CyberLink PowerBackup 1.1, CyberLink PowerCinema 4, CyberLink Medi@Show 3	E Trust EZ Antivirus 2005, Nero 6, WinDVD 5, Colin McRae Rally 04, WinDVD Creator 2	CyberLink PowerDVD 5, Panda Antivirus Titanium 2005, Roxio Easy Media Creator 7
Windows XP Home	Windows XP Home	Windows XP Home	Windows XP Home	Windows XP Home
Windows CD	Restore CD, restore partition	Restore CD	Windows CD	Restore CD
One year RTB	One year RTB	One year onsite, two years RTB	One year RTB for PC including 30-day collect and return, three years onsite for monitor	One year onsite
One year RTB	One year RTB	One year onsite, two years RTB	One year RTB	One year onsite, 5 years RTB
10am-6pm Mon-Fri	8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat	9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri	9am-6pm Mon-Fri	9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat
1999	1939	1987	1993	1972
10	Not disclosed	42	3	20
16	Not disclosed	275	68	130
£649	£569	£649	£650	£650
£552	£484	£552	£553	£553
Gladiator Computers	HP	Mesh Computers	PCNextday	Watford Electronics
08456 444666	08700 104320	08700 464747	Web only	08716 661616
www.gladiatorcomputers.com	www.hp.com/uk	www.meshcomputers.com	www.pcnextday.co.uk	www.savastore.com